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ABSTRACT

In a creative writing workshop of seven male and nine female graduate students, two female students became increasingly aware of a sexual bias. Though the male instructor made an effort to create a non-hierarchical, student-centered environment, informal hierarchies developed among students that granted the male instructor and the male students more authority. The males seemed to be doing most of the talking, the women most of the listening. To test this observation, two female students took turns timing and recording discussions (but in a non-scientific way). Results showed that men talked nearly twice as often as women. Further, men usually talked first; they set the agenda and women merely responded to it. According to gender theorists, socialization leads both men and women to contribute to a dynamic that allows men to talk more. Further, the traditional writer's stance is that art and politics should remain separate, a philosophy that makes it particularly uncomfortable for women to address political issues. Deborah Tannen's "You Just Don't Understand" sheds some light on the situation. She suggests that men and women have different conversational goals: women talk to connect with others; men talk to gain status. Also, the workshop process may go against women's styles of learning. In "Women's Ways of Knowing," Belenky and her colleagues found that women learned better through "connected knowing"--learning based on empathy, listening, and believing rather than doubt, antagonism and competitive turn-taking. (TB)

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Gender Inequity in the Workshop: Methods which Silence Women Writers

I have participated in, observed, and taught writing workshops at four Midwestern universities. Three of those universities had predominantly or exclusively male faculty and mostly male students. As might be expected, men spoke in workshops far more than women did. But in the fourth program, creative writing faculty were predominantly female and workshops tended to contain more women. Many men in this program initially spoke sensitively about women's issues and seemed genuinely interested in what women had to say. Workshop instructors made an effort to create a non-hierarchical, student-centered environment. Yet I noticed informal hierarchies developing among students, who seemed to grant male instructors and advanced male students more authority. It seemed to me also that men were still speaking more in workshops.

To test this, a classmate and I timed the speech of our colleagues during one class session. All together, there were nine women and seven men students, and a male instructor. My classmate and I decided to work together so that we could still participate in the discussion while the other continued to monitor speaking times. Our observation was not in any way scientific, but simply an effort to discover who was talking and how often, and to note gender interactions. In discussions of two student stories, women

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spoke 31 times, men 57, nearly twice as often. Out of nearly 70 minutes of discussion, women spoke a total of 16 minutes, a significantly smaller portion of time. While I'd suspected that women were talking less, I was surprised by how much less. Why, even in a workshop balanced between genders, were women relatively silent?

Socialization leads both men and women to contribute to a dynamic that allows men to talk more. Further, the traditional writer's stance is that art and politics should remain separate, a philosophy that pervades many workshops and makes participants particularly uncomfortable about addressing political issues. To appear to be true artists, students strive to overlook the way the privileging of male speech directs the discussion's content and to ignore the way this dynamic normalizes some experience and marginalizes others. This is an especially harmful dynamic in a class where discussions revolve around writing based on personal experience. When female (or minority) students conclude that their experiences, perceptions, or opinions are abnormal or "weird," they become even less likely to speak up.

I noted a number of gender-related interactions during the timed workshop discussions. There were long silences before discussion began; then, it was male students who spoke up. Because men were in these cases more willing to start the discussion, they set the agenda; we women then either agreed or disagreed with their comments. The male instructor spoke an average amount, but male students held the floor for long periods of time, sometimes seeming

to lecture the rest of us.

It is unlikely that most male students were being intentionally oppressive. Deborah Tannen's analysis of male and female conversational styles in You Just Don't Understand sheds some light on what was going on in these interactions. According to Tannen, women and men have different conversational goals: women talk primarily to connect with others, men to gain status. This accounts for women's greater reluctance to start discussions and their greater comfort in responding to and connecting with what had already been said. This also explains why men tended to lecture; many men are more comfortable using conversation to vie for status and authority, and they are more likely to think of information as a gift to others (125).

Workshop members responded to tension in different ways, depending on the sexes of those in conflict. Disagreements between men occurred occasionally and created only slight tension; but the tension level rose among all students during conflicts between women or women and men. One woman jumped in at moments of greater tension, saying things like, "It doesn't really matter if we understand this story. It's a good story anyway." Classmates listened patiently, then returned to their discussion as if she hadn't spoken. This woman was clearly very uncomfortable with conflict and eager to reestablish rapport.

For some women, the tension issue ties in with one of authority. As the only woman with a terminal degree in creative writing, I felt reluctant to speak for long and to assert opinions,

particularly those in disagreement with prevailing ones. Despite more education and experience than most of my classmates, I didn't feel that I received the same respect as male classmates. I also felt uncomfortable about referring to my previous experience, as if mentioning authors my classmates hadn't heard of or my observations about editors amounted to bragging.

My discomfort with claiming authority created difficulties in speaking. This discomfort most likely was the result of complex interactions of others' responses to me and my own internalized conditioning. I related to Tannen's statement that evidence of a women's superior knowledge often sparks resentment while evidence of a man's invites respect (127). This may be because unconsciously we expect women to promote connection and men to vie for status, and become uncomfortable when people fail to behave according to gender expectations. To avoid causing such discomfort, says Tannen, women hold back what they know, appearing uninformed or uninterested, because they fear offending others (131). They are also more likely to hide success while it is more acceptable for men to boast or brag (219). I found all of these expectations holding me back from speaking. No doubt pervasive conversational expectations and societal definitions of acceptable behavior are difficult to overcome for many other students as well.

Another woman, a PhD student with several publications, remained silent for other reasons. She assumed that there was no need for her to speak because others were saying what needed to be said, and no one had solicited her opinion, a common female pattern

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according to Tannen. Other women, all masters students with varying amounts of writing experience, said they felt that they received less respect than male students, and that when they spoke they felt rushed and often cut off. A female master's student in another workshop told me that classmates addressed advanced male students when discussing their work, but talked about all other works as if the authors weren't there.

Perceptions that I and other women were granted less authority have several possible explanations. Other women may have shared my subtle sense that we had violated our proper roles if we created disagreement rather than connection. My anxiety and similar anxieties on the part of other women may have caused us to further undercut our authority by, as Tannen suggests, phrasing our ideas as questions, rushing what we had to say, and communicating uncertainty in our postures, adding to our natural disadvantage of speaking at lower volume and higher pitch, which causes women to be taken less seriously (239).

The sense that women are denied authority plays a part in silencing them, but so may their discomfort with the workshop's dominant conversational style. According to Tannen, in mixed groups, women adjust to male styles of conversation. This provokes further anxiety. Women's conversation tends to overlap more than men's and to include positive and reinforcing comments. In the more male dynamic of the mixed group, women translate the lack of verbal affirmation as disapproval even when it is not intended as such. Some women also find a more male style of conversation

exhausting. I often gave up trying to jump in between comments; getting a word in edgewise required me to tune out my classmates' words and become a predator of pauses.

The very workshop process may go against many women's styles of learning. In Women's Ways of Knowing, Belenky and her colleagues interviewed 135 women and discovered that they learned better through "connected knowing"--learning based on empathy, listening, and believing rather than doubt, antagonism, competitive turn-taking, and the dissection of arguments (115). Gesa Kirsch suggests in Women Writing the Academy that "connected education" finds ways to help students "recognize the validity of their own experiences, and encourages them to take control of their educational processes" (133). Such teaching, according to Kirsch, helps women students to gain authority by making them more aware of the various social factors--gender, race, and class among them--that shape rhetorical situations as well as their lives.

The traditional workshop is highly resistant to analyzing social and political factors that play a part in the writing itself or in workshop interactions. A notion of pure art, art that remains separate from both autobiography and from politics, so pervades most workshops that it is considered a travesty to acknowledge the political aspects of all writing. In the session I timed, one woman repeatedly disavowed feminism whenever she expressed feminist views, and the male-dominated discussion tended to revolve around the male characters in both stories, despite the fact that one was written by a woman from a female point of

view. No one attempted to question the appropriateness of this or change the direction of the discussion.

However, as my female classmates and I talked outside of the workshop about our perceptions, we determined to support each other in speaking up as diplomatically as possible about class politics. It was the first writing workshop in which I have seen women unite rather than divide. Immediately, our male classmates, seeing us socializing outside the workshop, complained that we were gathering to plot against them. The seating arrangement became polarized: men on one side of the room, women on the other. The instructor tried several techniques to resolve the tension and make sure everyone spoke, including having students lead the discussion and having each person speak in turn before discussion became a free-for-all. By the end of the semester, almost everyone in the class was participating, but tension remained over the content of discussions. For example, Women were dismissed when they complained about the portrayal of a female character, or were disturbed by the implication that a woman is turned on by a man who breaks into her house and tries on her lingerie while she is away. After the workshop was over, the instructor accused women of ruining the workshop by "politicizing" it, a situation Deb will further address in her presentation. We had rejected the role of creating connection in the class and the result was disaster. Merely bringing up gender issues was seen as akin to attack.

Fear of creating defensive responses on a smaller scale keeps many women silent in workshops. As male voices continue to

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dominate for numerous reasons, the content of the discussion often unintentionally leaves women students feeling isolated or abnormal and suggests that some experiences are not worth writing about. In her article, "The Great Ventriloquist Act: Gender and Voice in the Fiction Workshop" from the September 1993 AWP Chronicle, Julie Brown notes the tendency of women students to write from male points of view. I have noticed this tendency too, especially in younger women. The assumption that art can be judged on an objective, apolitical basis leads many workshoppers to deny that they may be more attracted to some works because as readers they relate more to the experiences described.

Because of the experiences that workshop members most vocally relate to and because of our society's privileging of males, young women come to see male experience as more significant, female experience as something to be transcended. A classmate in my undergraduate workshops once told me that she wrote more from male points of view because, she said, "If you write from a woman's point of view, you have to account for things like her period." Such comments suggest that young women have been conditioned to think of women as the "other," a departure from the norm--a norm perpetuated by the insistence that there is one standard that determines what art is.

Stigmatizing female experience is often a byproduct of these attempts to separate the personal and the political. In most classrooms, an incest or rape survivor, or even a women who has had an abortion, is unlikely to claim the authority of her experience

for fear of stigma. Experiences statistically more likely to happen to women remain invisible as a result. In a workshop, speaking up about such personal experiences not only violates social codes but mixes art and life, the personal and political, in unacceptable ways. As a result, those verbally evaluating the authenticity of such writing are often those with the least knowledge about the experiences, and these experiences are sometimes dismissed as "talk show subjects" rather than the realities of many women's lives. Many people fear creating a "confessional" classroom, but it is not necessary to turn the class into a support group in order to acknowledge students' variety of experiences and discuss them in a matter-of-fact way in the context of writing.

When men do most of the speaking and women most of the listening, women's experience inevitably becomes redefined. When we do not question assessments of a female character as overreacting, lacking in rationality, crazy, demanding, icy, or unattractive, women students receive messages about the acceptability of their experiences and begin to see themselves in stereotypical ways. When no one questions a group of undergraduates who laugh uproariously when someone suggests that a male character ought to poison a female character who they dislike, we promote misogyny as well as one-dimensional characters. Such comments also silence women who fear being perceived as crazy, demanding, unattractive, or worthy of poisoning if they speak out, and may convince them that areas of their experience are too weird

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to write about honestly.

While gender dynamics are unlikely to change much unless socialization practices change, awareness of these dynamics on the part of all workshop members can help create an atmosphere in which a wider range of students are willing to speak. Redefinitions of what constitutes art, honest examination of the personal and the political and the functions of autobiographical detail in the context of creative writing, and sensitivity to the varieties of experience and views represented in a class rather than defensiveness are necessary first steps.